



Up to date Assessment of the results of the research on the Dahalik language (December 1996 - December 2005).

Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle

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**Up to date Assessment of the results of the research on the
Dahalik language (December 1996 - December 2005)**

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SUMMARY

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Foreword

Nine years after having discovered the existence of the Dahalik language, five years after having started to describe it, on the eve of leaving for the fourth time to investigate on the Dahlak Islands, it is appropriate to assess what we have learned about this language which is the mother tongue of most of the islanders of Dahlak Kebir, Nora and Dehil, the three inhabited islands in the Dahlak archipelago.

Acknowledgements

Before getting to the heart of the matter, I wish to express my deep gratitude to all the people, in Eritrea and in France, who made, at different levels (financial aid, logistics, scientific exchanges, moral support), the fieldwork go smoothly and successfully.

In Eritrea, in Asmara, His Excellency Osman Saleh, Minister of Education, Petros Hailemariam, Director general of the Department of Research and Human Ressource Development in the Ministry of Education, Hailu Asfaho, Director of the Department of Research in the Ministry of Education, Mossa Nayib, Director-general and Abraha Russom, Director of the *Curriculum* Branch in the Ministry of Education. In Massawa, M. Totil, the Governor and his assistants. I feel particularly grateful to General-Major Houmed Karekare whose constant help made it fast and easy to access the islands.

The interviews with Yohannes Zemhret, who is in charge of culture and communication at the PFDJ, and the help he provided, have made possible the diffusion of the knowledge of Dahalik. The exchanges with my colleagues of the Curriculum Branch in Asmara, and in particular with Saleh Mahmud of the Tigre Department, have played a part in the progress of my research.

The Alliance Française in Asmara, under the direction of Pierre Montaigne, the Centre Français d'Etudes Yéménites (French Centre for Yemeni Studies), under the management of François Burgat, the embassy of the state of Eritrea in Paris, the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research) and LLACAN (Language, languages and Cultures of Black Africa).

All the Dahalik speakers who, in Eritrea, in Massawa and in the Dahlak islands, are collaborating actively on my research. I am grateful for their hospitality, their indulgence, their dynamism, for generously sharing the knowledge of their language and of the history and culture of the inhabitants of Dahlak, whether their mother tongue is Dahalik, Afar or Arabic. Mohammed Ramadan, ever since the 2002 fieldwork has spared a lot of time, introduced me to the best informants and has inspired them with his enthusiasm for the research on the language. His family has always welcomed me as one of their people. In Massawa, the work with Ahmed Saad, and his son Abdallah, is extremely helpful for a best knowledge of the language and the traditions of Dahlak.

Finally, I would like to mention that it was on the initiative of our late lamented friend and colleague, Idris Abback, that this research was undertaken. Unfortunately, since April 1998, my gratitude can only honour his memory.

A brief history of the French research on the languages spoken in Eritrea

The study of Dahalik is part of the research programme on the languages spoken in Eritrea, which started within the LLACAN at the end of 1996 and which was formed by two researchers: Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle and Martine Vanhove. This programme set up on the initiative and with the collaboration of Idris Abback, was intended to be integrated in a project of collaboration between the LLACAN, the CNRS and the future *Centre for the languages and cultures of Eritrea*, that Idris Abback was going to set up in Eritrea. His death in 1998 and the war have frozen this project; the linguistic research on the field started again only in 2002.

This programme pursued research on three languages of the Afro-Asiatic phylum: in the Cushitic branch, Afar and Saho, and in the Semitic (Central Western) branch, Arabic, in its vehicular and vernacular varieties.

The first fieldwork was conducted by Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle and Martine Vanhove. It took place in the region of Massawa and all along the coastal plain, up to Rahayta, at the border with Djibouti; it focused on Afar, and on Saho spoken in Irafayle and Gindae, as well as on Arabic as *lingua franca*. We went to Dahlak Kebir to study Afar and Arabic spoken on the island, the discovery of the existence of Dahalik as an endemic language on the Dahlak Kebir Island was incidental (cf. below).

Between 1997 and 2000 no fieldwork could be conducted. However, I kept working in Paris on the data collected in 1996 (Afar, Saho, Arabic and Dahalik). In January 2000, after the *International Conference Against all Odds : African Languages and Literatures into the 21st Century* in Asmara¹, while I was able to carry out a brief survey with some Saho speakers in Asmara, I could not find there any Dahalik speaker. In 2002, following a fieldwork on spoken Saho in the Hirghigho area and on the plateaus, between Adi Keyh and Sen'afe, I went to Massawa. There I was able to work with native speakers of Dahalik. I was able to return to the Dahlak Kebir Island only in 2003. In 2004 the fieldwork was exclusively dedicated to Dahalik but it took place on the continent, in Massawa; I then learned that the language was also spoken on two other islands and, in 2005, for the first time I was able to survey on the three islands: Dahlak Kebir, Nora and Dehil.

The 1996 and 2000 fieldworks were entirely financed by the CNRS (LLACAN), the 2002 one was partly financed by the CNRS and by the CFEY (*French Center for Yemenite Studies*) of Sanaa. The Alliance Française in Asmara helped with the logistics. The 2003, 2004, 2005 fieldworks were co-financed by the CNRS and the Alliance Française in Asmara.

¹ On this occasion, I gave a paper 'Afar spoken in Eritrea' (January 14th 2000).

The discovery that the Dahalik have their own language

The programme of the 1996 lead by M.Cl. Simeone-Senelle and M. Vanhove has been approved by the Eritrean Ministry of Education. This programme comprised a five week long exploratory fieldwork on Cushitic, Afar and Saho languages and on Arabic, the native language of the coast North of Massawa (the Rashaida's language) and the *lingua franca* on the entire Red Sea coast.

It is in order to investigate Arabic and Afar that we went to Dahlak Kebir, thanks to the help of Major General Karekare. During the investigation, some elderly speakers told us the endemic language on the island was called 'Dahalik' [dahālik], that it was different from Arabic and Afar and that it was close to Tigre. So we recorded very short texts, and, in the primary school in Jimhile, we recorded four ten-year-old children (a girl and a boy native speakers of Afar and a girl and a boy native speakers of Dahalik), this giving us a possibility to establish a comparative list of vocabulary in Afar, Dahalik. The questions were asked in Arabic in the presence of the teacher.

In Paris, at the beginning of 1997, I gave the recordings to Idris Abback, a native speaker of Tigre (Hirghigho area), who was multilingual, spoke Arabic and knew other Afro-Semitic languages: Tigrigna, Amharic. He did not know Dahalik and even though he could recognize many of words in the utterances, he did not understand the general meaning. Thereafter, I checked each of the 256 lexemes of the vocabulary list by comparing them to the words taken from Wolf Leslau *CDG*². This first approach enabled us to relate the language to the Southern Semitic group on the lexical level. At the same time, we noticed many borrowings from Arabic. The influence of Afar seemed almost fortuitous.

It was possible to take over the fieldwork on Dahalik only in 2002, in Massawa (2002, 2004) and in the archipelago (2003, 2005). The classification of Dahalik within Southern Semitic was confirmed, first with the study of the verbal system then with the study of the syntax as a whole. At the same time, testimonies and texts clarified the knowledge of the history of the island's population, the history of the formation of the language and of the Dahalik customs. As we kept working in the field, original features as well as common features with other linguistic groups in contact have emerged. During the 2004 fieldwork, I learned that Dahalik was also spoken in two other permanently inhabited islands of the archipelago: Nora and Dehil (Dese island, close to the Bori peninsula, is inhabited only by Afar speakers). Therefore I planned to go to the three islands in March 2004 and, from Dahlak Kebir, I was able to reach Nora and Dehil for a survey. It confirmed the hypothesis of the existence of dialectal variants, caused by different degrees of the intensity of contacts on each island (cf. *infra Dialectology*).

² CDG = Wolf Leslau. 1987. *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic). Ge'ez - English / English - Ge'ez with an index of the Semitic roots*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Survey Methodology

The language is apprehended first and foremost as a means of communication between human beings, in a given socio-cultural and natural environment. We based our study on the native speakers' updated speeches, accounts and texts collected and examined *in situ*.

Whenever it is possible, I work with both children (boys and girls) and adults (males and females from different parts of the islands, of different ages and from various socio-professional groups). The texts are examined, transcribed, translated and glossed with the help of reliable informants. Mohammed Ramadan, the most recommended informant since 2002, has been trained in the use of my survey methodology. The glosses and the translations are given in Arabic.

The data that are not tape-recorded consist of answers to grammatical questions that are directly noted down. All the texts, accounts, comments as well as numerous grammatical data are recorded on mini-discs, including the glosses in Dahalik and in Arabic. As for the lexicon: in 1996, the survey was conducted in a contrastive and comparative perspective between Afar, Arabic and Dahalik using a lexical list (256 words) set up by M. Swadesh, and arranged by D. Cohen for Semitic languages. Since the second fieldwork, the vocabulary is collected from texts and from the questions relevant to specific semantic fields. All this lexicon is processed by the SIL *Shoebbox* software, in its version developed by Christian Chanard (CNRS- LLACAN). A dictionary was constituted and will be set up in collaboration with Saleh Mahmud from the Curriculum Branch of the Ministry of Education in Asmara. It would be ideal if this dictionary were multilingual: Dahalik - Arabic - Tigre - Tigrinya – English. Up to now, 1500 items are entered in the *Shoebbox*, with their variants and illustrations of their use in short sentences.

The *phonetic- phonology* is established from the recorded texts, and it is derived from the answers of the informants when transcribing and glossing the texts.

Morpho-syntax. At the beginning, the morphosyntactic studies are done on the basis of the texts and various recorded accounts. Then some questionnaires are created in the field, as I transcribe and analyse the data, as well as in Paris when studying the texts and writing the papers/articles on Dahalik. Questions that arise during the data analysis are used to work out specific questionnaires.

Texts and Oral literature: The language is apprehended not only as a means of communication between human beings but also as a vehicle of their culture, which underscores the importance of oral texts in my research. Some of these texts belong to literature, and for these a purely linguistic analysis is combined with an ethnolinguistic approach, as well as comparison with other literary texts of the same cultural areas.

Sociolinguistics: The study of the sociolinguistic situation in the islands and in particular the study of the language contacts is pursued systematically because it constitutes a tool to understand the language genesis. The study of contacts, and of interferences, enables us to determine in which way the language evolved. In the particular case of Dahalik, it must enable us to better define its

place within Southern Semitic while assessing to what extent it is related to the Northern Afro-Semitic sub-group.

The notes taken when travelling and interviewing the informants without recording them, deal with linguistic behaviours or cultural habits. They are very helpful for elaborating the language description and spreading the knowledge about the Dahlak islands.

Arabic: the translations of the texts, the glosses and comments are in Arabic, the *Lingua franca* of this region. These utterances make up an important corpus on which the research on Arabic spoken on the African side of the Red Sea is based (cf. Simeone-Senelle 2000b).

FIRST RESULTS³

Summary of the results obtained during the fieldwork.

1996 ‘Discovery’ of Dahalik. One week. Children (10), women, and adult males surveyed in three villages on Dahlak Kebir island: Dahlak Kebir, Sal’et, Jimhile. Short texts on Dahalik and a list of contrastive vocabulary were recorded.

2002 Two weeks and a half, survey in Massawa. Six informants, men between 18 and 58, from different villages on Dahlak Kebir (Jimhile, Dub’ullu, Durubbishet) were surveyed : two high school boys, three fishermen, and one merchant. Study of noun morphology: plural of nouns, paradigms of adjectives, of personal pronouns, of interrogative pronouns, of deictics. In verbal morphology, we particularly paid attention to the various paradigms of the common verbs, regular and irregular. The verbal system seems to be particularly rich. The language distinguishes two types of progressive forms, two future tenses, and the verbal derivation is very productive. The causative, passive and intensive forms are the most common ones. In syntax, it was possible to work on the order of the words in the syntagm and the sentence as well as the various processes of the determination of the noun, the genitive construction and how the sentence with copula works.

Collection of a dozen of texts, accounts of tradition and daily life (history of Dahlak, marriage customs, circumcision, sprinkling rite, tanning, dairy production). As for the lexicon, we started to constitute the dictionary (Dahalik, French, English) using *Shoebbox*. We are considering compiling a multilingual Dahalik dictionary in collaboration with Saleh Mahmud of the *Curriculum Branch*.

2003 Two weeks, in Massawa and on Dahlak Kebir. I have recorded and worked with seventeen native speakers: 7 men between 30 and 65, 5 women between 20 and 60, 5 children between 7 and 14 (3 girls and 2 boys), in different villages on the island : Dub’ullu, Sal’et, Jimhile, Durubbishet, Dahlak Kebir. Then, with Mohammed Ramadan, in Massawa and in Dub’ullu, I have

³ The results take into account only the research on Dahalik. A subsequent, more general assessment will focus on Afar, Saho and Arabic.

checked many data collected in 2002, essentially the verbal system. The recorded corpus includes vocabulary, nominal and verbal paradigms, narrative and discursive texts (18), concerning tradition and daily life, domestic and professional life (fish), marriage rites, birth rites (burial of the umbilical cord and of the placenta, the care given to the new mother and the new-born baby, traditional medicine (uvulotomy, ignipuncture, cupping glass), a few games. I have also collected short texts about Dahalik language, and its importance.

For the first time some traditional literary texts were recorded: poems and songs (work and wedding songs, lullabies), and one long folktale.

2004 Eight days in Massawa, mostly with Mohammed Ramadan: continued the transcription of the texts recorded in 2003. We checked the first 600 entries of the dictionary along with the examples. The work was dedicated to morphology issues, and syntax derived from the texts, such as verbal constructions using ideophones (compound verbs), subordination and relative clauses. I was told that Dahalik is also spoken on Nora and Dehil.

2005 Three weeks, two of which spent on Dahlak Kebir: Dub'ullu, Durubbishet, Jimhile (Dasqo), with travelling to Nora (in Gad) and to Dehil ('Ad village). The surveyed speakers are women, men and children; they are Dahalik native speakers between 7 and 65; among them two girls, 8 and 10 years old, who have learned both Dahalik and Afar (their mother tongue) at the same time.

We paid careful attention to the dialectal variants, in all the fields of the language, in order to delimit a dialectology of Dahalik.

As far as morphology is concerned, the survey on grammar focused essentially on the verbs: morphogenesis of the compound tenses and grammaticalization, as well as the expression of qualification. The syntax has enabled us to better grasp the use of the speech particles in literary texts, subordination and reported speech. Recording of many literary texts: 20 tales, three anecdotes of Abu Nuwas, three riddles (with an interesting codeswitching with Arabic); accounts on the sea; texts about witchcraft. I have also collected notes of historical data about the ancient village of Dub'ullu, the inhabitants of Nora and what tradition says about the origin of the Dahalik language. As for the numerous collected terms of the lexicon, they mostly deal with thehalieutical vocabulary and the fishing and sailing techniques.

The language and its status

The speakers refer to their language by **dahālík**. This term corresponds to the common plural of the adjective of relation/origin 'the one from Dahlak': **ana dahalākay/dahāley**, **dahalākáyit/dahāleyt** 'I (m.sg./f.sg) (am) from Dahlak'; **neḥna dahālík** 'we (are) from Dahlak', and **ana dahālík aharre** <pr.1sg(S)/Dahalik/ speak.impft.1sg> 'I speak Dahalik' equivalent to **hari** (or **ḥāka**) **na dahlāk aharre** <language/of/Dahlak/ speak.impft.1sg> 'I speak the language of Dahlak'.

The speakers themselves claim that their language is particular to the islands and different from Arabic and Tigre. Some of them think that it is a mixed language based on Arabic and Tigre (they don't mention Afar), and that as regards vocabulary it has items from Arabic and Tigre, rare items from Afar, and possibly some recent and scarce borrowings from Tigrigna. All of them insist on how old their language is, 'it has always been spoken on the island ever since it has been inhabited, more than 2000 years ago'. They all have a strong awareness of their identity and insist on the originality of their traditions, while lamenting the fact that they are little-known or not known at all.

In the literature, when it comes to the language spoken by the islanders, the authors present it as a Tigre dialect (Munziger in Dillman, 1860:1, Longrigg, 1961: 92), or as a language close to Tigrinya (d'Abbadie, 1890: 26), or also as a dialect that is specific to the islanders without further detail (Linzee Gordon, 2000: 391).

At present, Dahalik, the existence of which was unknown until 1996, has not been recognized as a national language and could not benefit from the research done to standardize and to elaborate its written form, as it has been done with the other nine Eritrean national languages taught in primary school (Tigrinya, Tigre, Arabic, Afar, Saho, Hidareb, Bilin, Kunama, Nara). Arabic is the language for teaching in the primary schools of the three islands. By declaring in an interview given to the Reuter agency in April 2005 that 'The plan is that one day Dahalik will also be taught in schools', Yohannes Zemhret, who is in charge of culture and communication at the PFDJ, has shown that the Eritrean authorities take interest in this research. He suggested that this 'non material' part of the cultural patrimony of Eritrea should be taken into consideration and its preservation must be encouraged.

MAIN LINGUISTIC FEATURES⁴

Hereby, I present the results stemming from the analysis of the recorded texts and questions posed to the informants during the last four surveys. My research is in progress, and these results should not be considered as definitive.

Some features are specific to Dahalik, others are also found in Tigre and/or Tigrinya. Also, Arabic, language in contact, has a great influence, especially on the lexicon. It is very present, as a mother tongue for some islanders, as a contact language on both shores of the Red Sea, as the *Lingua franca* for a majority of the inhabitants, and finally as the language of religion (all islanders are Muslim). Afar, besides the lexical field, seems to have little impact on Dahalik.

⁴ Abbreviations : AUX. auxiliary - c. common - COP. copula - deict. deictic - EP. epenthesis - f. feminine - gem. gemination - gen. genitive - impft. imperfect - m. masculine - NEG negation - O object - pft. perfect - pers. personal - PI personal indice - pl. plural - pr. pronoun - pref. prefix - PROG. progressive - S subject - sg singular - suf. suffix.

Phonetics and phonology

— *The consonants*: The inventory of the consonant timbres is presented in the following table. The signs in brackets represent rare or combinative variants (thus ʕ only appears in two borrowings; ɣ and ʁ are variants of /q/ in consonant and vocalic context respectively).

Table of the consonant timbres

| | occlusive | fricative | emphatic | nasal | lateral | vibrant* |
|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|----------|----------|----------|
| labial | b | f | | m | | |
| dento-alveolar | t d | | ṭ | n | l | r |
| dorso-alveolar | | s (z) | ṣ | | | |
| palato-alveolar | | š ǧ | (č) | | | |
| palatal | g | y | | | | |
| velar | k | (x) (g) | | | | |
| labio-velar | | w | | | | |
| uvular | q | (ɣ) (ʁ) | | | | |
| pharyngeal | | ħ ʕ | | | | |
| laryngeal | | h ʔ | | | | |

It must be noted that, unlike Tigre Mensaʕ, the emphaticals are not glottalized, but slightly velarized (more slightly than their equivalent in standard Arabic). The pre-palatal affricate ǧ (like in Arabic) is only attested in some idiolects: ǧabal or gabal ‘mountain’; ǧinn, ǧinniyet or ginn, ginniyet ‘ginn (m., f.)’. As in some Arabic dialects of the Arabian Peninsula, and in some Arabic loans, there is a phonetic gradation ǧ ~ q in both ways for both fricative and uvular phonemes: baqar or baǧar ‘cow’, luǧa or luqa ‘language’.

— The phonology of the *vocalic system* is still to be set up. There are six vocalic timbres: **i**, **e**, **ə**, **a**, **o**, **u** (maybe seven with **ɛ**). **ə** appears only in unstressed syllables. I cannot assert that the length is a relevant feature in the vocalic system of Dahalik. In examples such as: **amāʕud** ‘guts’, **bōʔa** ‘inside’, **rūḥuq** ‘far’, the long vowel can be conditioned by stress or be an allophone of the short vowel, in contact with a pharyngeal or a glottal stop. Moreover this feature seems to depend on the speaker.

— The *other phonetic features* concern consonant assimilation: /**bisit-da**/ > [**bisidda**] <woman/ deict.f.sg> ‘this woman’, but /**bisit-ta**/ > [**bisitta**] <woman-COP.fs> ‘it is a woman’; /**bīl + ko**/ > [**bikko**] <say.pft.1s> ‘I said’ (**bīla** ‘he said’); /**hayyib-a-l-na**/ > [**hayyibanna**] <give.impft.3ms-EP.to-pr.1pl(O)> ‘he gives to us’; and backward vocalic harmony: **ḥembirit** ‘navel’, **ḥemburut-u** <navel-pr.3m.sg(O)> ‘his navel’.

Morphology

Nominal morphology

Pronouns

Comparative table of personal independent pronouns (S)

| sg. | Dahalik | Tigre (Raz: 36) | pl. | Dahalik | Tigre (Raz: 36) |
|-----|-------------|-----------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1 | ana | ʔana | 1 | nehna | ḥəna |
| 2m. | enta | ʔənta | 2m | (h)intum | ʔəntum |
| 2f. | enti | ʔənti | 2f | (h)intun | ʔəntən |
| 3m. | itu | ḥətu | 3m | (h)itun | ḥətom |
| 3f. | ita | ḥəta | 3f | (h)itan | ḥətan |

Comparative table of dependent pronouns suffixed to nouns and verbs (O)

| sg. | Dahalik | Tigre (Raz: 37-8) | pl. | Dahalik | Tigre (Raz: 37-8) |
|-----|-------------------|------------------------------|-----|------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 | -(h)e /-ni | -ye /-ni | 1 | -na | -na |
| 2m. | -ak | -ka | 2m. | -kum | -kum |
| 2f. | -ik | -ki | 2f. | -kan | -kən |
| 3m. | -o, (h)u | -u;-o,-wo,-yo, hu,-yu | 3m. | -(h)um/un | -om;-wom,-yom,-hom |
| 3f. | -a | -a, -wa, -ya, -ha | 3f. | -(h)an | -an, -wan, -yan, -han |

ḥū-he <brother-1sg> ‘my brother’; **ḥēt-e** <sister-1sg> ‘my sister’; **bayn-e-na** <alone-EP.1pl.> ‘ourselves’.

Nouns

The substantives (nouns and adjectives) have two genders, two numbers for nouns, but generally a common plural for adjectives. **-t** is the feminine marker for nouns and a few adjectives: **darbet** ‘storm’ (f.); **baham** (m.), **behimet** (f.), **bahaʔim** (c.pl.) ‘stupid’. Gender opposition for adjectives is very often marked by vocalic apophony: **ḥayir** (m.), **ḥaʔar** (f.), **ḥaʔirin** (c.pl.) ‘small, young’.

Internal plurals are widespread: **darāb** ‘storms’; (m.sg. **ḥačar**) **ḥačyir** (c.pl.) ‘short’; external plurals with suffixes are rare for nouns, more common for adjectives: (sg. **haʔan**) **haʔan-et** ‘children’; **ḥayir-in** (c. pl.) ‘small’; **ṭawilin** (c. pl.) ‘tall’.

Definite article

The definite article is **ya-**, invariable and prefixed to the determined noun; it is specific to Dahalik: **ya-marʕat** ‘the bride’; **ya-marʕawi** ‘the bride groom’; **ya-ḥaʔanet** ‘the children’.

Deictic

There are distal and proximal deictics (pronouns and adjectives), they are inflected for gender and number. The distal deictic is a complex element made

up of a **kay-** or **koy**⁵ - basis (according to the speaker) + suf. pers. pr. referring to the determined: **kay-hun** ‘those (m.)’. The proximal deictic is simple: **di** (m.), **da** (f.), **din** (m.pl.), **dan** (f.pl.) ‘this’.

Copula

There is a copula inflected for gender and number (of pronominal origin, cf. the 3rd persons in the list of independent pronouns) that is always suffixed to the predicated noun:

bisit-ta ‘it is a woman’, **ḥaʔan-tu** ‘it is a boy’; **ḥaʔanet-tun**, **ḥaʔanet-tan** ‘they are children (m., f.)’.

Verbal Morphology

Like in the other Semitic languages, the verbal system and the paradigms are based on a binary aspectual opposition (perfect, imperfect) which broadened into a temporal-aspect system that uses compound conjugations with auxiliaries. The verbal morphology of the basic and derived verbs displays similarities with that of the verbs in Semitic, and more precisely, in Southern Semitic, for the perfect.

Table of the paradigms of the personal/gender/number indices in the verbal conjugations.

| | Perfect | | Imperfect | |
|-----|----------------|-----------------|---------------|-------------|
| | Singular | Plural | Singular | Plural |
| 1 | — ko | — na | (a)— | nv — |
| 2m | — ka | — kum(n) | tv — | tv—u |
| 2f. | — ki | — kan | tv—i | tv—a |
| m | — a | — yu(n) | | — u |
| 3f | — et/et | — ya(n) | tv — | — a |

In the perfect, the 1sg. personal index is similar to Tigre (Tigrinya **-ku**). In the imperfect, the verbal personal markers are similar to Tigre and Tigrinya, except for 3m.sg. and 3m.f.pl. (**y-** in Tigrinya, **l-** in Tigre). But for some irregular verbs such as **bīla** ‘to say’, the 3rd m. PI is **i-**:

ibil ‘he says’; **iblu** ‘they (m.)say’.

— Like in the other Semitic languages, verbs have a basic stem and derived forms (by prefixation of a morpheme).

The majority of verbs are trilateral. The most frequent verbs have a basic form with the second radical duplicated in the unaccomplished conjugation (imperfect). They are of the following type : **sakaba** / **sakkib** ‘to sleep’; **wade** / **waddi** ‘to do’; **hāba** / **hayyib** ‘to bring’.

— The derivative prefixes and the semantic values of derived forms are comparable to Tigre: **adarasa** / **adarris** ‘to teach’ (**darasa** / **darris** ‘to learn’);

⁵ This element *k*, is found in other Semitic languages, like in Arabic and in SAM where *-k* is suffixed to the form of the deictic of proximity.

ame ʔe / ama ʔi ‘to bring’ (cf. **meʔe / maʔi** ‘to come’); **sabābara** ‘to break into many pieces’ (cf. **sabara / sabber** ‘to break’)

The negative conjugation.

Verbs are denied by a discontinuous morpheme which is: **yi-** prefixed and **-ni** suffixed to the verb (or to the verb + suf. pr.). This form can be compared to the verb negation in the imperfect in Tigrinya: **ʔay—n**, and **y—n** (Leslau 1941: 75, 88), but in Dahalik the second element **-n** is reinforced by **-i** : **yi-ʔammer-ni** <NEG.-to know.impft.3m.sg-NEG> ‘he does not know’; **yi-meʔe-ki-ni** <NEG.-to come.pft.3m.s.-pr.2fsg.(O)-NEG> ‘he didn’t visit you(f.sg)’.

However, in a compound conjugation with the auxiliary **ḥaddi** /to want/, the negation is expressed by the negative shortened form of the auxiliary **(h)alle** /be/ (without the second element **-ni**): **aʔaddim y-elle-ḥaddi** <he is quiet/ NEG.-BE.pft.(PROG).3m.sg.>-want.impft.3m.sg> ‘he doesn’t want to be quiet’ or ‘he will not be quiet’.

Syntax

Word order

Like in the other Afro-Semitic languages, the dominant order is:

— in the nominal syntagm: Qualifier - Qualified, when the qualifier is an article. When the qualifier is a distal deictic, or a personal pronoun, it is always suffixed to the qualified. As a determinative deictic, it is more often suffixed to the noun, sometimes reduplicated and circumfixed to the noun (but it is very rarely only prefixed): **ḥaʔan koy-hu** ‘that boy’; **(da)-bisit-da** <(deic.f.sg) women-deic.> ‘this woman’.

The epithetic adjective and the qualifier noun are always placed after the qualified noun: **dahlak ʔabbay** <dahlak/ big(f.sg)> Dahlak Kebir; **bet-umm-u** <house-mother-pr.3m.sg(O)> ‘his mother’s house’.

— In the verbal syntagm, most of the time, the auxiliary follows the verb: **sakab kōna** ‘he has/had slept’.

— In the sentence, the canonical order is: SOV, the subordinate clause precedes the main clause. But in the complex sentence, the rule is often bent since the main clause precedes the subordinate clause.

Syntax of the verb

It is on this topic that we focused our attention because the syntax of the verb seemed particularly complex and highly developed.

Many compound tenses enrich the basic aspectual system. They are based on periphrastic constructions: verb + copula / auxiliary, where both the auxiliary / copula, and the main verb are conjugated. This construction characterizes the relation of the speaker to the process or the relation between two processes inside a text (present, progressive, past, plus-perfect ...). Moreover, these

⁶ In Raz (1983: 76) the verb is denied by the negative morpheme **y-** prefixed to the verb, but Mahmoud Saleh specifies (personal communication, Jan. 2005) that ‘This is also common in the Tigre dialects of the eastern lowlands of Eritrea’.

compound conjugations make the expression of many modalities possible (future, inchoative, asserative...). Some constructions are close to Tigre, others are not attested in Tigre, but in Tigrinya.

— Future may be expressed by imperfect and the suffixed copula: 2sg. m/f: **tibil-tu/ta**, 2pl. m/f **tebelū-tun/tebelā-tan** ‘you will speak’. (Cf. the expression of futurity in Tigre with a periphrasis: **ʔəgəl** + jussive + **tu** (invariable), (Raz 1983: 68-69).

— Another conjugation is used to express proximal future, progressive and imminence. It is compounded with the imperfect of the verb + the perfect of **(h)alle**, ‘to be, to exist, to have (to be at)’, used as an auxiliary (cf. Tigre, Raz 1983:71). The process is presented as certain, sure.

The habitual in the past may be expressed by a periphrasis: verb and auxiliary **kōna** (present in Tigrinya and in Arabic, absent from Tigre)

| | | | |
|----------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|
| dik-ken | mí | tebīl | kúnka ? |
| in.gem.-there | what | say.impft.2m.sg | be. AUX.pft.2m.sg |
| | ? | | |

When you were there, what were you saying ?

The verb ‘to want’ when used as a modal auxiliary, and often when used as a full verb, is always used with the auxiliary **(h)alle/elle**.

may ḥaddi (h)elle <water / want.impft.3m.sg./ be.AUX.PROG.pft.3m.sg> or **may le-ḥaddi** <water / be. AUX.PROG.pft.3m.sg/ want.impft.3m.sg.> ‘I want water’.

The grammaticalization of the construction with the auxiliary **(h)alle/elle** is much more developed than the constructions with **kōna**, especially when the auxiliary is placed in front of the verb. Because of the very low degree of grammaticalization (close to zero) of **kōna**, it could be suggested that this periphrasis is more recent than the one with **halle, elle**. The word order in the verbal syntagm might also indicate in which direction the evolution occurred: it might have evolved from an AUX + V order (as it is attested in modern South Arabian for instance)⁷ to the V + AUX order.

| | | | | |
|---|------------|----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| buxḥet | ana | dib-bet | ʔannáḥ-a-ki | ko-ḥaddi |
| tomorrow | 1s. (S) | in.gem.-house | wait.impft.1sg- -EP.-2f.sg | AUX.PROG.1s.-want.impft.1sg |
| As for me, to morrow, I’ll wait for you at home | | | | |

ko-ḥaddi < **elliko ḥaddi. ḥaddi liko** is also found with a lesser degree of grammaticalization.

The following example illustrates the strongest grammaticalization with the auxiliaries **elle** and **ḥaddi**, both in the same periphrasis:

le-ḥa-ʔannáḥ-a-ki
be.AUX.PROG.3msg.-want.AUX.FUTURE- wait.impft.3ms- EP.-pr.2fs(0)

Compare with:

⁷ Simeone-Senelle, 1997: 11.

ʔannáḥ-a-ki

wait.impft.3ms- EP.-pr.2fs(0)

He will wait for you

le-ḥaddi

be.AUX.PROG.3msg.-want.AUX.FUTURE

With **kōna**, the absence of agreement in number with the subject, is the first degree in the process of grammaticalization:

kulli

all

nahár

day

kōna

be-aux.pft.3m.sg

gayyisu

go.impft.3m.pl.

Every day, they were going out.

Here the agreement would require: **kōnayu gayyisu**.

Syntax of the utterance

The subordination with a value of condition/temporal is placed most of the time at the end of the subordinate clause, at the border between the subordinate and the main clause:

ḥalib

milk

galiltu

little-cop.(m.sg)

men-gabbi

if

kile

2

ḥabbet

piece

afaggir

extract.impft.3m.sg

If/When there is little milk, he extracts (from it) two pieces (of cheese)

ʕāsa

fish

belʕako

eat.pft.1sg

em-gabbe

if

buqḥet

tomorrow

aw

or

gišam

after tomorrow

ḥammem

be ill.impft.1sg

If I eat fish, tomorrow or the day after I will be sick

Note that the completive subordinates are constructed in parataxis:

ḥadagayu-ha

let.pft.3mpl.-pr.3f.sg(O)

tegayyis

go.impft.3f.sg

maraḥeb

bush

They let her go into the bush

So far, at this stage of research, my knowledge of the syntactic structures of the other Afro-Semitic languages and in particular of Tigre and Tigrinya is not thorough enough to evaluate the originality of some Dahalik constructions.

Lexicon

With the halieutic vocabulary and the sailing techniques vocabulary, we can see the influence of Arabic on the language of the fishermen who have regular contacts with the other shore of the Red Sea, which is Arabic speaking and monolingual. The techniques have mostly been acquired with the Arabs, thus the borrowings from Arabic are by far the most frequent. The sea-related terms which come from Greek, Italian, Persian, Portuguese, Turkish, are for the majority those that are found in this whole area of the Red Sea.

We can list borrowings coming from

- Italian: **basta** ‘pasta’, **barka** for ‘small fishing boat’, **bāni** ‘white bread’, **kōkiyan** (<conchiglia ? ‘seashell’) ‘mother-of-pearl, any seashell that produces mother-of-pearl’, **bonsola** (<bussola) ‘compass’, **lamba** ‘bulb’;

- and from English: **itrik** or **truk** (< *electric*) ‘flashlight’, **dūš** ‘satellite dish’, **fībər** ‘boat made of fibreglass’, **ginnenetər** ‘generator’, **tan** ‘ton’.

kastara ‘to sweep’ and **maskatari** ‘broom’ according to the informants, would be borrowed from Tigrinya, not from Tigre. For some words it is difficult or impossible to know what language they are from, such as **šamaṭri** ‘cinnamon’ (< from *Sumatra* ?).

The main semantic fields in the dictionary include

- the sea: halieutic fauna and flora, fishing tools and techniques, different types of boats, sailing techniques; shipbuilding; names of winds. It is the richest field by far.
- kinship terms ;
- body parts; body care and ornaments; diseases;
- names of colours;
- rites (birth, circumcision, marriage);
- traditional games (ball games, knucklebones, sticks throwing, blind man’s buff, hide-and-seek);
- witchcraft and magic;
- the house; names of daily life tools and utensils; food, recipes; clothing;
- meteorological phenomena, seasons;
- toponyms (among which about fifty names of islets);
- names of tame and wild animals (the lexicon is poor in this field: no wild animals but gazelles (only on Dahlak Kebir) and almost no cattle).

TEXTS

The recorded poems and the folktales are witnesses of an enduring old oral literature.

A variant version of the first tale recorded in 2003 has been recorded in 2005. It is particularly interesting. It seems to be a survival of very ancient literary traditions. Some passages are reminiscent of the Bible, and others are reminiscent of the traditional oral literature of pagan inspiration, such as I have collected among the Mehri and Soqotri native speakers in Yemen (note that in the island of Soqatra and in Mahra, people speak languages completely different from Arabic and belonging to the same Southern Semitic group as Dahalik).

The 20 tales collected in 2005 on DK and Dehil, and told by very young girls and young adults, bring out not only how lively this genre is but also how closely linked the Eritrean and the Yemeni cultures are, as far as theme (gin, ogress, metamorphosis) and hero-characters (Abu-Nuwas) are concerned.

The poems are most often sung. They deal with love, beauty and the qualities of the lover and of the bride. Those which deal with more daily life events have many interferences with Arabic. Work songs (rowing songs, net-towing songs) as well as lullabies were recorded. These traditions are clearly in the process of being lost.

In general, translating and glossing the poems pose a problem of comprehension: the language seems to be archaic, ‘very difficult’ for the

informants (even including people who pass them on). The cultural and historic references are not well known, if not completely forgotten. These texts contain extremely precious information not only on language but also on the links the people used to have with the continent and with Tigre on the coast.

A distinctive feature of the riddles is that they are rare and that they are asked in Dahalik, but the answer is given in Arabic (or the other way around).

The non-literary texts concern mainly:

- fishing techniques;
- past and present life out at sea; ship wrecks; accidents at sea
- women's domestic life (with recipes),
- traditional medicine,
- marriage (dowry, marriage proposal, ceremony), and childbirth customs (burial of the placenta and of the umbilical cord, the care given to the new mother, celebration for the birth of the tenth child ...);
- social organization, cooperatives;
- the story of people's settlements;
- etymology of some place and ethnic names;
- accounts of witchcraft and exorcism;
- the relationships between the islanders and the mainlanders, the sociolinguistic situation on the island, the Dahalik language, the importance and the necessity of describing and preserving it.

DIALECTOLOGY

During the 2002-2004 fieldwork, I had found many variants among the speakers, in phonetics (such as phenomena of vowel harmony), in morphology (in the conjugation of certain irregular verbs or in the treatment of the verbs borrowed from Arabic), in syntax (with a variation in the order of the words and propositions), and, on the lexical level, with the more or less systematic recourse to Arabic borrowings.

I then wondered if these variants were the result of idiolects, of sociolects (men's speech *vs* women's speech, children's speech *vs* adults' speech) or of geographical, dialectal variants. I had noted differences between two speakers of the same family and of the same village (the father, a shopkeeper, and his son, a highschool boy in Massawa), and also between speakers from Sal'et and from Dub'ullu (about six kilometers apart), between Dub'ullu speakers and Jimhile speakers (about 24 kilometers), who belong to the same generation and the same professional group (fishermen). I had to take into account the linguistic situation in each village in order to estimate the influence of the languages in contact. In 2004, a fieldwork was planned in the three islands after I have learned that Dahalik was also spoken in Nora and Dehil islands. These islands are far away from Dahlak Kebir and from each other, Dehil being closer to the continent and to the Tigre-speaking area. The first results of this 2005 fieldwork confirm what I suspected: the differences seem to be more important between Dahlak Kebir and Dehil than between Dahlak Kebir and Nora.

Some features are characteristic of the dialect of Dehil, lexically speaking with terms such as **ḥetan** ‘children’ (**ḥaʔan** in DK and Nora), **diga** ‘for’ (**digi(l)** in DK and Nora), **baṭaha** ‘he arrived’ (**abaʔa** in DK). As far as morphology is concerned, the distal deictic does not have the same form as the one used on DK and Nora (cf. § Deictics); the negative conjugation is not always reinforced by **-i** postfixed to the verb. The Dahalik dialectology is yet to be established.

LINGUISTIC SITUATION, LANGUAGES IN CONTACT

Multilingualism is dominant in the three islands. Apart from older women, any adult islander speaks at least two languages (his/her mother tongue plus a second language) and many people have a passive knowledge of a third, even a fourth language. It varies according to the island, the distribution of the inhabitants speaking different languages within the same village, also according to the speakers’ professional activity. On Dahlak Kebir and Nora, the Dahalik-speaking inhabitants make up the majority; the other languages in contact are Afar and Arabic. On Dehil, there are no Afar speakers; the number of Arabic speakers is slightly superior to the number of Dahalik speakers. According to the islanders, there are no Tigre speakers living on the islands. In most villages, the linguistic communities interact on a daily basis, and although some neighbourhoods like Bergish in Dahlak Kebir are entirely inhabited by Afars, or the village of Dahret on Dehil is Arabic while the village of ‘Ad is Dahalik-speaking, the short distances and the school which gathers children from all communities favour daily contacts. I have examples of cases in which children from a mixed neighbourhood, whose mother tongue is Afar, speak Dahalik as well as their Dahalik friends with whom they play, tell tales, partly share the daily life and go to the same school. Due to mixed marriages and shared daily life with children from other linguistic communities, many children actually have two mother tongues (two first languages).

School being in Arabic, the educated children all know the language, if only in its standard form.

Men, in contact with Massawa for business reasons, know Tigre, and Tigrinya (in addition to Arabic, and Afar). This situation explains why code-switching and loan words are common among men. They are aware of that, and are able to detect the Tigre/Arabic/Afar borrowings in the others’ speech, more easily than in their own speech.

Adults, essentially men, can alternate two or three languages in their conversation.

In general, on the islands and on the coast, Arabic is the *Lingua franca*, when the speakers have different mother tongues. Arabic has a lot of influence; codeswitching Dahalik / Arabic is very frequent among men, especially among fishermen who have contacts with the other shore of the Red Sea, not to mention those who have kinship, even from a long time ago with Yemen

On the island of Dehil, which is closer to the continent, men are more in contact with the Tigre-speaking area and some of them know and speak Tigre. Among the women, the situation is different. Except a few Tigre women, married to islanders, none of them knows Tigre. Like for men, the situation also

depends on the villages. For instance, in Dub‘ullu, where the speakers of different languages are in daily contact in a small area, some Afar women have a passive knowledge of the Dahalik language, to say the least. In other places many Dahalik women understand Arabic and Afar, but they do not speak them. I noticed that women who had different mother tongues (Afar, Arabic, Dahalik) were able to talk together for hours, each speaking in her mother tongue and were able to understand each other.

Another information to mention: islanders may claim they are Arabic due to their paternal ancestry, often very far back in time, even when their mother tongue (and first language) is Dahalik. Some women who claim to be Arabic do not use that language with their children; some even know little of it. All these phenomena are to be taken into account when studying the variants linked to language contacts. The situation in the area and especially on the islands is particularly rich and complex, and it is very representative of the linguistic richness of Eritrea.

PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

The more we describe Dahalik, the more the possibility of a creole, suggested by some specialists at the beginning of my research, seems unlikely. Updating the complexity of the verbal system, of the nominal and pronominal morpho-syntax and of the syntax of the complex sentence obviously shows that Dahalik in its modern form cannot be considered as a creole based on Arabic or Tigre. The data show (see § above *Characteristics*) a close relation between Dahalik and Tigre, and similarities with Tigrinya. The comparisons with Arabic (Central Semitic) mainly concern the lexicon. There is no doubt that Dahalik is genetically related to Southern Semitic and more precisely to Northern Afro-Semitic. However, the divergences with Tigre are too important to consider Dahalik as a dialect of Tigre. If Dahalik can be considered, in synchrony, as an original variety, the question of its origin remains. We must try to determine if the language, as it appears in synchrony, results from the evolution of an ancient Southern Semitic language, in contact for millenia and on a small area with languages from other families, or if it is a re-vernacularized from an old *Lingua franca* that disappeared.

EXCHANGES AND COLLABORATION

The LLACAN-CNRS and the *Centre des Cultures et des Langues de l'Erythrée* (Center for Cultures and Languages of Eritrea), led by Idris Abback (cf. above) had started to collaborate as early as 1997, but it could not be fully developed before its director died. Contacts have been initiated in order to institutionalize collaboration between Eritrean researchers and French researchers from the CNRS, via the LLACAN. These matters have not been a priority for the past few years, due to the situation.

On each fieldwork, contacts are made in Asmara with the Ministry of Education: the Minister, the Centre for research at the Ministry, the Curriculum

Branch and its different departments (Afar, Tigre, Arabic, Saho), as well as with the Director in charge of culture at the PFDJ.

Apart from the interviews I have with the Eritrean leaders, each year I propose giving a lecture on the languages studied in Eritrea. Each fieldwork is set out in a detailed research programme which is submitted to the authorities in charge, and followed by a very thorough report to these authorities. Aside from the fieldwork in Eritrea, the exchanges with the colleagues of the *Curriculum Branch* are made through electronic mail and any publication concerning the research on the languages of the Horn of Africa is passed on to them. However the publications are in French, which is a problem.

I would like to mention that, on my initiative and thanks to the help provided by the Alliance Française of Asmara and by the LLACAN-CNRS-INALCO, an Eritrean professor and researcher, Ghirmai Negash, assistant professor at the University of Asmara, in the Department of Eritrean languages and literature, was invited to participate to the summer school workshop *Collecte et traitement des données de terrain (Collecting and processing field data)*, organized by the LLACAN-CNRS, on Porquerolles island, in France.

Perspectives

The contrastive description of Dahalik cannot be done without describing the Tigre spoken in the Massawa area. This variety has never been studied. Therefore, working with specialists of Tigre, especially with the researchers who study the Tigre spoken on the coast, is highly desirable. In this perspective, to study Dahalik and Tigre, it is planned to consolidate and institutionalize the collaboration with Saleh Mahmud of the Tigre Department in the *Curriculum Branch* in Asmara, as soon as the situation improves. A young PhD student, whose thesis on 'the syntax of Tigre in the Massawa area' I accepted to supervise, might be integrated in this project. His name is J. Brindle and his PhD is done under the joint supervision of the INALCO in Paris and the University of Trondheim in Norway. Moreover, the official collaboration might also allow us to start compiling and finally publish the Dahalik dictionary.

It is impossible to make a comprehensive description of Dahalik without resorting to other disciplines besides linguistics. We also have to use data on the history of the islands and of their population, but the sources are extremely scarce and incomplete. Resorting to multidisciplinary research (linguistics, history, archeology, anthropology and ethnology, geography, sociology) seems to be scientific necessity. It is a considerable work which would need a whole team of researchers, which is for me another reason for wishing to work in collaboration with Eritrean colleagues.

As planned in the programme set up with Idris Abback for the *Centre for the languages and cultures of Eritrea*, it also seems highly desirable to plan short term exchanges, by inviting the Eritrean researchers (or PhD students) in linguistics and in literature to participate in the research of the LLACAN, to have lectures on their own work and to participate in internships organized by our team members.

The fact that my research was so well received in Eritrea and the help provided by the Eritrean authorities certify a great interest to this programme. This encouraging and stimulating attitude is an invitation to persist in my research.

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

In the near future, in March-April 2006, a four-week fieldwork is planned (*cf.* programme submitted in November 2005 to the Eritrean and French authorities in Asmara). It will take place on the three islands, Dahlak Kebir, Nora and Dehil. On the first one, I will focus on completing the corpus of tales with the help of a woman storyteller I had planned to work with in 2005, and on collecting texts from a fisherman known for being the keeper of Dahalik memory. On the two other islands, the work will consist in collecting a bigger corpus of texts and in studying the different variants and the sociolinguistic situation in the archipelago. All of it will then be transcribed, analyzed, and glossed on Dahlak Kebir or in Massawa.

In the long run, the exhaustive description of Dahalik and its dialects must take into account the Tigre variety of Massawa, in order to evaluate, among the similarities between the two languages, the part of contacts and the part of the common origin, in order to understand the genesis of the language, its classification within Afro-Semitic, and its relations with other languages of the Southern Semitic Group. Extra fieldwork is necessary, especially to study thoroughly the variants between the dialects of the three islands and to have a better knowledge on the traditional literature.

We must also take into account the urgent aspect of this research. Indeed, a certain number of criteria allow us to classify Dahalik among the endangered languages. Such criteria are:

- 1) small number of speakers who are in contact with widespread and more valued languages,
- 2) language is not taught,
- 3) vernacular language that cannot become a *Lingua franca*,
- 4) language completely ignored until the end of the 20th century
- 5) evolving traditions and lifestyle.

It is absolutely necessary to describe the language in a monography out of it, which will also present the culture conveyed by the language. It is this emergency which made Dahalik my scientific preoccupation, leaving the research on Afar and Saho on the second plan..

The current research should result in the exhaustive description of Dahalik, along with a sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic study, in the form of a book. Subsequently, a volume of texts and comments and a bi/multi-lingual dictionary will be published.

Eventually, this description will be integrated into a linguistic atlas of Eritrea, which will take into account the other national languages and their dialects.

My research programme also deals with Afar, Saho and Arabic spoken in Eritrea by populations which have been in contact with each other for thousands of years on the African shore of the Red Sea, an area which has definitely played a significant part in the semitization, and in the islamization of this whole Eastern African part.

We know that studying languages is a precious tool to apprehend the human language in general. It also sheds a light on the history of the area and of the

populations. The linguistic research contributes thus to spreading and safeguarding a part of the Eritrean patrimony and, on a larger scale, to have a better knowledge of the humanity's heritage.

WORK AND DOCUMENTS ON DAHALIK

Programmes and Reports (1996, 2002-2005)

Before each fieldwork, a scientific programme is submitted to the authorities to be validated. After coming back from each fieldwork, a scientific report synthesizes the first results obtained, presenting the perspectives. All these documents are sent to the Eritrean and French authorities in Asmara, and copies are made for the members of the LLACAN.

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